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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Jordanian Youth and the Future of Jordan

1. (SBU) The following cable was drafted by an FSN member of the Embassy staff. We thought it was particularly interesting as a description of the youth scene from the inside.

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Summary  
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2. (SBU) Frustrated and insecure about the future and the prevailing social and economic situation, Jordanian youth are now willing more than ever to consider leaving the kingdom for better opportunities elsewhere. Many young Jordanians, especially those who have had the chance for a U.S. or other Western education, feel hampered by limited job opportunities, constrained free expression, societal pressures, familial expectations and tribal ties. On the one hand, the society lives by conservative traditional standards, and on the other hand Jordan is changing and globalizing so rapidly that many young people find themselves in between conflicting worlds. A sense of alienation drives some to look outside the Kingdom's borders. End Summary.

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The Familiar Complaints of Youth  
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3. (SBU) Jordanian youth across the board feel frustrated. For some, this frustration centers on a sense that they are victims of discrimination, favoritism and abuse of power by a "wasta" connected elite. They don't like how society is run, but feel powerless to change the situation. A second, more diffuse complaint focuses on the cultural constraints that prevent them from living their lives as freely as they would like, or feeling that they control their own destiny. Siham, a university student, is typical. She says she wanted to study art, but was not allowed because her family thought it's inappropriate and dishonorable for a girl to go into such a field. Siham now studies Law instead because this is what her parents want her to do. Like young people elsewhere, Jordanian youth struggle to express themselves. There is an inner conflict between wanting to be individualistic and being bound to live in the shadows of the family, tribe and community.

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Buffeted by the Political Winds  
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4. (SBU) Living in the Middle East, Jordanian youth cannot help but be caught up in the dual crises on the country's borders: Israeli-Palestinian violence to the west, and the seemingly never-ending problems in Iraq to the east. Roughly half of the population is of Palestinian origin, many with families still living in the West Bank, so emotional support for the plight of the Palestinians is intense. Furthermore, many young Jordanians are willing to overlook what they recognize as Saddam's brutal nature, and instead see in him a strong Arab leader, a latter-day Salahaddin, who will reclaim Arab honor. In a youth culture bereft of credible leaders, the thirst for an authentic Arab hero - even one as flawed as Saddam -- is strong. What happens in the West Bank and Iraq quickly reverberates in Jordan. Political consciousness peaks during times of intense violence across the river, and ebbs when relative quiet returns. Similarly, many feel disappointment with their own government for prohibiting them from protesting as publicly, or as loudly, as they would like.

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The Economic Factor and Wasta  
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5. (SBU) Popularly-held estimates of unemployment in Jordan run as high as 35% -- although official figures are less than half that. So-called underemployment of people working less than full-time or in jobs beneath their qualifications is probably substantially higher. The current population numbers nearly 5 million, with more than 75 percent under the age of 30. As such, Jordan faces the challenge of placing 130,000 students into universities and 70,000 new entrances into the already squeezed labor market each year.

University entrance is difficult even with good grades because of the limited number of seats. There are certain quotas or number of seats given to family members of the armed forces and Royal Court. For example, a Jordanian student whose father was in the army can get a seat even if he/she didn't fare better than another student. All recognize that if you have "wasta" (connections), the rules can be bent in your favor, and opportunities for advancement will be far greater. Young Jordanians without wasta fear not only that they can't compete for well paying jobs, but that they aren't competitive for any jobs at all. Pessimism and frustration push some to seek better job opportunities abroad.

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The Brain Drain and Differences Between  
The Haves and The Have Nots  
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16. (SBU) Youth who choose to leave, do so for two main reasons: (1) to make money or (2) to seek greater freedom, challenge, and adventure. Many upper middle class Jordanian Youth are finding the Kingdom too small for big opportunities, the ceiling for personal expression and freedom too low, and the regional political situation too unstable. While the government has pursued a "Think Big" campaign to motivate the country for success, many Jordanian youth are thinking bigger than what is available here.

17. (SBU) For instance, many upper middle class youth have the resources to start businesses in Jordan but are afraid of the future and anxious about putting their life savings into a country that they perceive as caught in the middle of an unending regional crisis. They would like to stay in Jordan and realize their ambitions and aspirations here. That said, many focus not on the opportunities that could exist, but on the shortcomings they see around them, be it in education, work and employment, health, leisure, access to information, freedom of movement - no matter how comfortably they live. They complain about the hike in general taxes, but that doesn't stop them from buying; they complain about the levels of education, but at least they can afford to go to schools and colleges; they complain about not finding good challenging jobs, but they won't starve if they don't work.

18. (SBU) Lower class youth share many of the same concerns as their wealthier counterparts, but without the financial safety net. Jobs are harder to find and when found are underpaid. The father's income is no longer sufficient to feed and educate the entire family. Youth are under economic pressure and complain that the government is not doing enough to better their situation. Life is a constant struggle for them and they live day to day and can not afford to plan ahead or dream too far. For 19-year-old Ghassan, making a living is a struggle. He spends 16 hours a day collecting fares on a bus in Amman and gets paid 6 Dinars a day. He says it is hardly enough to support his 6-member family. Ghassan is one of many youths forced to drop out of school to join the labor market. Professor Shteiki, a sociologist at the University of Jordan, says that young Jordanians have the will to develop themselves but not the opportunities, while "the government still lacks a clear vision to understand the basic needs for social and economic development."

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Conclusion  
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19. (SBU) The growing gap between the rich and poor youth is a cause for concern. Upper class Jordanian youth have their education and work secured for them. They have access to information and are well rounded. They can afford to travel, and usually speak more than one language - this helps them integrate into the larger world around them. They have the know-how and positive attitude that enables them to challenge convention, and they are thus more able as young adults to demand their rights. They also have the means to "vote with their feet" and seek opportunities elsewhere if they feel unfulfilled here.

10. (SBU) For those with less financial means or wasta connections, life is often a struggle from the outset: to enter Universities, to study what they want and later to have access and acceptance into the very competitive labor market. They have more limited access to information, and are not encouraged to grow and to challenge the status quo. Society assigns them the role they can play, and this can lead to stagnation and depression. Resentment toward their richer counterparts grows, and frustration becomes a central drive. These youths end up propagating the cycle with their children. They don't push them to achieve and to challenge because they know the limits.